

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK JOINT GROUP held as a Remote Meeting via Zoom on Friday, 16 October 2020

PRESENT: Councillors Mrs M L Beuttell, Mrs A Costello, R J West and Mrs S R Wilson.

APOLOGY: An Apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor T D Sanderson.

1 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED

that Councillor R J West be elected Chairman of the Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Joint Group for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

Councillor R J West in the Chair.

In his introductory remarks, the Chairman welcomed the news that a 99 year lease had been obtained for the Country Park and that 3 of Huntingdonshire's parks and open spaces had been awarded the Green Flag Award 2020, including Hinchingsbrooke.

2 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 13th March 2020 were approved as a correct record.

3 MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

4 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED

that Councillor Mrs M L Beuttell be appointed Vice-Chairman of the Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Joint Group for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

5 MEMBERSHIP OF THE GROUP

To note the Membership of the Group for 2020/21 as follows:

(a) Cambridgeshire County Council

Councillor Ms A Costello.

(b) Huntingdonshire District Council

Councillors Mrs M L Beuttell, T D Sanderson, R J West and Mrs S R Wilson.

6 SENIOR RANGER'S REPORT

The Group received and noted the contents of the Senior Ranger's report (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) and a PowerPoint presentation on park activities for the period March to September 2020. In doing so, comment was made as follows:

Staffing and Volunteers

Members were informed of the impact of COVID-19 upon both staff and volunteers. Volunteer work parties had come to a halt which had resulted in increased work upon staff. Given the measures put in place, some work, such as chainsaw work, could not be undertaken as the site initially operated with one member of staff available at a time.

In addition to the work parties all other volunteering activities had also ceased owing to the pandemic. Members were however encouraged to note that, with the exception of the SEN group, all volunteer roles had now restarted and had been welcomed back via a phased approach. Members were assured that risk assessments and safe working practices were being thoroughly reviewed to ensure compliance with COVID-19 guidance in respect of both the voluntary workforce and external organisations that were hiring rooms at the Countryside Centre.

In response to a question raised by the Chairman, it was hoped that there would be an increase in volunteers as a result of the pandemic. The Senior Ranger confirmed that new volunteers had already signed up and started their roles at the Park. The Group concurred that the Country Park remained a vital asset to Huntingdonshire and that focus should remain on keeping the Park busy and thriving despite these challenging times.

Park Management

Despite the pandemic, the Group were encouraged to note the range of work undertaken at the site over the busy summer months which included keeping up with increased litter and antisocial behaviour, maintenance of meadow grassland areas and mown pathways, installation of the first layer of the new path along Top Ride at Bob's Wood, completion of tree safety works, repairing potholes around the Main Lake path and completing a "spring clean" tidy up and reorganisation of the yard and workshops.

With the assistance of the volunteer work parties new posts and rail fences had been installed in the extended yard area, the seasonal wildflower meadow had been cut and park signage and furniture had been refurbished and repaired.

Pursuant to Minute No. 19/11, Mrs S R Wilson requested an update on how the Park was progressing towards the production and sale of biofuel to the public.

The Senior Ranger informed that this project had dropped off as a priority owing to the pandemic but that investigations would be made in the near future.

Community Groups

Many of the Park's Community Groups had now resumed their activities with suitable safety procedures. Particular mention was made of the Huntingdon Canoe Club and the Huntingdonshire Bee Keeper's Association. The former had restarted activities in line with British Canoeing Guidance and whilst the latter remained closed, refurbishment works to the viewing gallery had been completed.

Satellite Sites

The Group were encouraged to note the range of maintenance works being undertaken at Views Common, Stukeley Meadows and Spring Common. Discussions have been ongoing with the District Council's Tree Officer about conserving some veteran and rare species of oak trees at the Views Common site.

Countryside Centre

Attention was drawn to occupancy levels and the number of bookings taken at the Countryside Centre between March - September 2020 compared with the previous financial years. Owing to COVID-19, the Centre remained closed to the public until 20th July 2020 where it reopened for one booking a day using both rooms to allow for social distancing. Given the move towards remote meetings, room bookings have significantly reduced. Despite this, the Centre has provisionally managed to secure a new weekly booking and was starting to receive new enquiries for room hire from new businesses and organisations who had not previously used the facility.

In terms of staffing, a member of staff employed within the Countryside Centre had left in July 2020. The role has not been replaced and the Countryside Manager was currently managing bookings with the ability to negotiate timings and charges.

Cafe

It was reported that the café closed on 16th March 2020 and reopened to provide a "grab and go" service on 23rd May 2020 operating with one member of staff and shorter opening hours. Members were encouraged to note the positive outcomes which had been achieved which included near to zero on food wastage, higher overall profit at 68% and low staffing costs. Options for a quality gift sales point in the café was currently being considered in the short to medium term. It was noted that to aid the winter months, outdoor heaters would be purchased for use in the area outside the café and that consideration would also be given to providing some sheltered cover in this area too.

The Countryside Manager reported that COVID had presented an opportunity for the Country Park to review its investment programme. Plans were now beginning to create a restaurant type facility. In the short term, the existing café would be developed to include a gift shop alongside the current "grab and go" service. In

the longer term, the need for both would be reviewed once the building works are completed.

Events, Activities and Promotions

Despite having to cancel a number of regular events, the Country Park had managed to successfully hold a number of cinema events and a Boogie Night event over the summer months generating a total of £7,626 in income. These presented an opportunity to trial an outdoor bar, which had proved a success and was now also being considered as part of the future long-term plans for the Park.

It was reported that planning for this year's Santa's Grotto via Zoom calls was currently underway. A decision was yet to be made about presents being delivered to participants as part of the event and it was confirmed that a charge would be levied upon those wishing to visit Santa. The Group commended the Countryside Manager and her staff for the creative and innovative ideas that were being pursued at the Park.

Car Parking

Councillor Mrs M L Beuttell informed the Group that car parking charges had been reintroduced back at the Country Park and encouraged all to download and use the MI Permit App which provided some scope for local advertisements and discounts. Following a suggestion made by a Member to introduce signage informing users that income generated from car parking fees were utilised by the Country Park, Councillor Mrs M L Beuttell undertook to review this suggestion and confirm when exactly this change would be implemented by the District Council. The Countryside Manager confirmed that this was likely to be from April 2021.

Financial Position

Members attention was drawn to the financial position of the Park at the end of 2019/20 financial year where overspends were reported on Hinchingsbrooke Country Park and Management attributed to the reduction in income from S106 projects coming to the end of their life. Members were however encouraged to note that an underspend of £20,000 had been achieved at the Countryside Centre owing to the generation of income from events including New Year's Eve and the Christmas Grotto and the hire of rooms. Additionally, it was reported that the café had overspent by £35,000 which was largely due to the number of casual café assistants employed over the financial year.

For 2020/21 financial year, there would be an expected overspend across all Countryside Services owing to the coronavirus pandemic. It was expected that the use of the café and Countryside Centre would not reach pre-COVID levels during the remainder of this year.

Following questions, the Countryside Manager confirmed that all avenues for generating additional income were being explored, including the possibility of repeating the outdoor cinema events whilst being mindful of competition from other local service providers.

Any Other Business

The Countryside Manager drew the Group's attention to car parking issues at Christie Drive. Councillor Mrs M L Beuttell undertook to give some thought to the matter with the Countryside Manager outside of the meeting. The Group were encouraged to submit their thoughts to Councillor Mrs M L Beuttell directly. In response to a question which had been raised, it was confirmed that increased car parking at the site had been included as part of the long-term development plans for the Park.

7 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting of the Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Joint Group would be held on 12th March 2021 at 10:00am.

Chairman